

HOME CRAFT COURSE

# Pennsylvania German Chests

by FRANCES LICHTEN



Volume 11

*Published by*  
MRS. C. NAAMAN KEYSER  
PLYMOUTH MEETING, PA.

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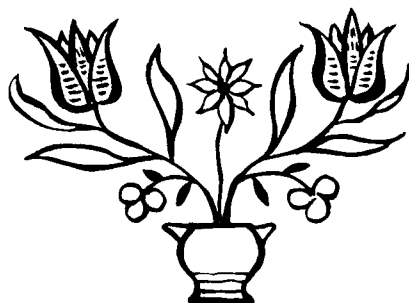


*Decorating the*



*Pennsylvania German  
Chest*

by FRANCES LICHTEN



Volume 11

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The Bride Box, shown in full color on the facing page and on page 35, is used in this book on chests because it gives an idea of the lovely color used by the Pennsylvania Germans in their decoration. The box was used to carry fine laces, valuable bits of personal property, or perhaps a bonnet.

*From a painting by Zoe Kauffman  
Engraving by Horan Engraving Company*

## Foreword

All the sketches from which I made the drawings for this booklet are taken from my own notebooks. The original sketches were made in many different places throughout the state, in attics, in private collections, small museums and historical societies. As State Supervisor of the Index of American Design, I had the good fortune to travel about the state in order to familiarize myself with the folk arts of Pennsylvania. This opportunity to study them was not presented during a childhood spent in a Pennsylvania German town. For at that time no one was aware of the existence of this native folk art, though the chests, only one facet of the many crafts the early settlers made, were still used to store blankets and patchwork quilts away in many an attic. Those less appreciated descended to very lowly estate, being relegated to outbuildings or used only to hold feed in the great Pennsylvania German barns.

The drawings selected were chosen because of their comparative simplicity of execution. The more intricate ones produced by the masters of their craft were excluded but can be seen in certain museums. For the religious interpretation of the symbols, one should read "Consider The Lilies" by John Joseph Stoudt.

---Frances Lichten

## The Pennsylvania German Chest— Its Background

The chest, the earliest piece of furniture on record, has been superseded in these days by other types of furniture, but in recompense, it is now appreciated, not only for its usefulness but for its decorative value. In the sparsely furnished dwellings of mediaeval days, the chest was the only storage space for valuables; it served as a seat by day and a bed by night. When goods were to be moved, it became a trunk. In the churches, it held both books and vestments.

Since it was first thought of, the chest has changed but slightly in its construction, but its embellishment has varied with the fashion of the day. It has been made of various woods; left simply panelled or else elaborately carved; intricately inlaid with rare woods; decorated with raised plaster details, then gilded; or ornamented with painting. After other types of furniture were made, its use became more personal. There are chests extant, marked with their owner's name, known to be 500 years old.

The Pennsylvania German chest, found in rural Pennsylvania, was made by the workers in wood among the Pennsylvania Germans, a large group of emigrants, who came from the Rhine countries and Switzerland to this state, from the time of its founding in 1683, up to the Revolution. These pioneering early settlers, political and religious refugees, arriving on overcrowded ships, could bring only a few small possessions with them. Having an inborn love of color and decoration, as soon as the early struggle for existence was over, they began to reproduce objects, cherished only in memory, with the materials at hand.

From local pine, poplar or walnut, they constructed their chests, which in their essential features were just like the ones shaped by long tradition, they had left behind them. Unable, however, because of different woods or lack of equipment to fashion the elaborate carvings, turnings and arched panels which adorned the remembered originals, they naively reproduced these details by painting them.

The flower-filled urn, executed in wood inlay in the 16th and 17th centuries, became the standard motif for 18th century painted decoration not only on the European but on the Pennsylvania German chest.

A native conservatism and loyalty to his cultural traditions were

characteristics of the early Pennsylvania German settler, so that his decorative craft objects, though produced in Pennsylvania, were very like those produced in certain parts of Germany and Switzerland. His kinfolk, coming later to share the new lands and newly found liberties, refreshed his cultural memories and continued to practice their crafts in traditional fashion. Only the changes that the pressure of living, the loss of skill when apprentices took hold and the lack of infusion of traditional ideas when immigration slackened, affected the character of the motifs used, during the long period in which chests were decorated.

Certain religious sects among the emigrants translated their mysticism into decorative forms—whose symbolic meaning dictated their use. These we find occurring again and again, the tulip or lily, the turtle doves, the pomegranate, the unicorn, stars, the pelican, the urn or grail; all pictorial representations of certain scriptural phrases.

At the end of the 18th century, experienced cabinet-makers turned out elaborate chests, with sunken arched or pointed panels, flanked by fluted pilasters and decorated with ornamented mouldings. These panels were filled with the typical symbolic motifs—but executed with an added refinement and skill, indicating the general rise in culture.

The dower chest, that traditional part of every Pennsylvania German young girl's gear, is always identifiable as such, since it is adorned with the maiden's name and a date. Infrequently, a chest is found bearing a masculine name which shows that it was the property of a person leaving his family roof tree to set up his own establishment.

Very little is known about the persons who decorated chests and other articles of use. Like other early artisans, they travelled from place to place, working for their board and lodging, painting inn signs and anything else ordered by their country clients, the Pennsylvania farmers, who had been waiting for the arrival of the itinerant artist. The dower chests, made in the farmer's spare hours, were transformed from plain pine boxes into gay and cherished pieces of furniture.

The conservative decorator varied his motifs but slightly, executing the design freely and easily because he knew it so well. Sometimes he scratched its outlines into the wood; sometimes he painted offhand. Occasionally an apprentice worked on a piece, making an amateurish interpretation of the more skilled work of his master. From a present-day viewpoint, these pieces have a naive freshness.

Although the sophisticated and refined taste of the late 18th cen-

tury city dwellers demanded the highest skill in decorative work, the country folk were satisfied with very simple decoration. Their indifference to uniformity, regularity, a free attitude towards others' traditions are all reasons to encourage one to decorate one's own chest today.

Undecorated Pennsylvania German chests are still to be found in antique shops, or at country sales. They are frequently grained in imitation of another wood than their own, or covered with a red paint, similar to that on barns. If defective, they can be repaired, ornamented in the fashion of the early ones; be proudly displayed as a decorative feature of a modern home, and still be used for any storage purpose. Contemporary manufacturers are also making excellent reproductions, which can be refinished.

A Pennsylvania German Chest harmonizes well with any of the simple antiques or reproductions made in pine and maple and with all the peasant accessories now easily obtainable.



# Materials

## PAINT

House paint in approximate desired color.

White paint (smaller quantity used to lighten it, if necessary).

## BRUSHES

Round pointed soft hair for the decorating.

Regular painter's brush for the background, 1" to 2".

## ARTIST COLORS in TUBES

Raw Umber

Yellow Ochre

Prussian Blue

Venetian Red

Vermillion

Chrome Yellow

Permanent Green

Ivory Black

## THINNERS

Linseed Oil

Turpentine

Japan Drier

Valspar— $\frac{1}{2}$  pt.

Paint remover (if old chest has to be refinished)

## MISCELLANEOUS

Thumb tacks, ruler or tape measure, old piece of glass on which to mix colors in small amounts.

Small tin cans for larger amounts.

Mahl stick (any stick about 3 ft. long—one end of which is padded with small wad of cloth—a broom handle or  $\frac{1}{2}$ " dowel stick).

A spare piece of wood is a fine adjunct to practice on before working on the chest itself. Coat it with paint at the same time you are applying the paint to the chest. See that you have both the background and the panel color on it. After trying your colors on it, and practicing your strokes, you can proceed with more assurance.

# How to Decorate a Pennsylvania German Chest

To paint and decorate a Pennsylvania German chest requires a little equipment, plenty of time and patience. Each coat of paint for the background should be allowed to dry thoroughly. If the chest is an old one—with coats of paint or varnish that should be removed before repainting, this process requires patience.

## TO REFINISH

Remove all traces of old paint with paint remover and steel wool, then wipe down freely with turpentine. If a new chest is to be decorated the same method should be used, for the highly finished modern surfaces do not harmonize with the old, freely painted designs.

## HOW TO PLAN YOUR SPACING

Select your design, take a piece of chalk and mark out on the unpainted wood the size and place for the panels, measuring carefully. Then look at what you have laid out, from a distance; if it looks too crowded or too empty, alter the spacings until they please you. Or you can cut the panels out of paper, tack them on with thumb-tacks, making your decision and alterations.

If you have chosen a panel with an arched top, the arch can be made with a compass, or lacking one, do as your grandmother would have done; find a circular object of the right size, (a plate or pie tin) and mark around it for the half-circle.

Your panel spaces being indicated with chalk on the chest itself, the chest must now be painted in order to form the background for the design which you are going to apply.

## PAINTING MATERIALS

The materials used by the original chest decorators were very simple paints. House paint or exterior paint comes in rich colors which, when toned down with a little white and raw umber (if you want them lighter than your basic color, or black and raw umber if you want them darker) will approximate the colors on the old chest very closely.

## COLOR SCHEMES

The panels had usually ivory or white grounds. The backgrounds were a dull red (like that of red barns), dark green, a dark or medium blue or a two-toned brown (a darker brown pattern mottled—grained or stippled over a lighter golden brown background). The bracket feet were painted black and the moulding around the lid and above the base was in a color that contrasted with the general background.

The ends of the chest were often decorated with the same panel as the face, but frequently an entirely different design would be placed there; a large star in a circle or a panel filled with mottling or stippling.

The colors used in the earliest chest decorations in the panels were only red, blue, white and black. Later, yellow, green and brown were added, but one can obtain excellent effects if one limits oneself to five colors.

## PAINTING THE GROUND

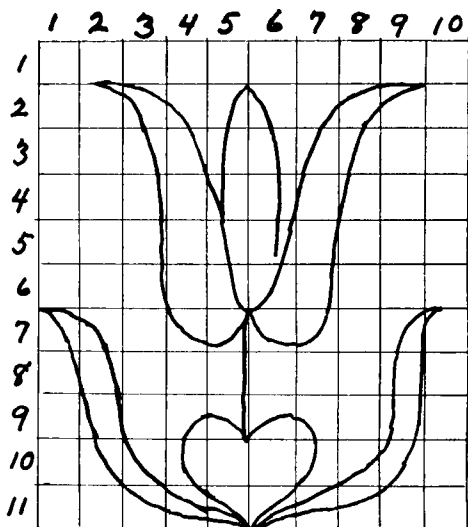
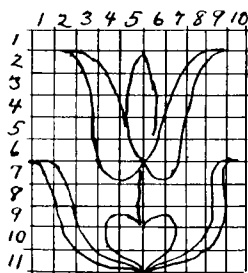
After having chosen your color scheme, be it blue ground, white panels decorated in red, blue and black, or brown ground, white panels decorated in venetian red, black and yellow, or dark blue ground, white panels, decorations in red, yellow and dark green, give the background its first coat of paint, thinning it slightly with turpentine to make it penetrate (if it is on absolutely new previously unpainted wood). The second and third coats (the latter is optional) should not be thinned, unless the paint seems too thick to brush on nicely. For thinner, use raw linseed oil, with a few drops of japan drier. Allow at least 48 hours between each coat.

The spaces for the panels can be filled in with white, (toned down to ivory with a touch of raw umber and yellow ochre). Give added coats until well covered. If desired the panels can be filled in first and the background swung in around them.

## HOW TO ENLARGE

To enlarge a design, now that you have established the exact size of the panel, is not difficult. Divide the design you wish to enlarge, with pencil lines, into any number of equal parts, numbering the squares thus obtained. Then divide the actual size panel which you have

marked out on thin paper, into the same number of squares, numbering them in the same manner. Copy into each of the larger



squares the exact detail found in the correspondingly numbered smaller squares. Strengthen all the lines of your design afterward so that you can see it plainly.

## TO TRANSFER THE DESIGN

(1) There are several methods of transferring the design from the thin paper on which you have made your enlargement to the chest panels. Rub in a bright colored chalk (red or blue) on the back of the drawing, fasten it firmly in position with thumb tacks and then trace with a hard pencil, leaving a colored line on the painted ground.

(2) If you have made the enlargement on manila or wrapping paper, prick the design with pin holes  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch apart and fasten the design down firmly with thumb tacks. Pulverize a strong colored piece of chalk or take powdered wash-blue, tie tightly in a piece of thin muslin and rub this little bag of color over the pin holes. This will leave a line of colored dots, which should be gone over with a soft pencil. Before painting, the superfluous color can be dusted off.

(3) The easiest method is to use a piece of red or black carbon transfer paper (not typewriter carbon). Insert the carbon paper between the drawing and the surface of the chest, tack it down and trace the design with a hard pencil.

## METHOD OF WORKING

Lay the chest on its back for these transferring processes, as they are more easily done in this position. It is also a good one in which to do the decorating.

## THE MAHL STICK

The mahl stick is used to support your hand as you paint. Hold it in your left hand (with the padded tip placed firmly so that it will not slip) a few inches above the surface and rest your right hand on it when painting the decoration and the borders. Its use gives you more control and steadiness. You can concentrate on your work with the assurance that your hand will not smear already painted areas. If the edge of your panels is none too straight, do not worry. The originals were frequently very irregular and your chest will have a naive charm if the contours are less than professionally accurate. The junction of the panel and the background is covered by a border of a contrasting color, usually one prominent in the design. This can vary in width from  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch to quite a wide band, which itself is frequently patterned with lines or ornament.

## METHOD OF PAINTING THE DECORATION

The decorative designs themselves are painted very simply. The shapes are filled in flatly, sometimes outlined with a contrasting color. As they are never shaded to suggest roundness, the painting presents no difficulties to the amateur. Sometimes for added ornamentation, dots or strokes in another color are superimposed on an already filled-in area.

## MOTTLING

After you have decorated the panels you may wish to add additional panels on the ends and top, filled with mottling or sponging. These patterned surfaces are very characteristic. They were usually done in the main background color worked on over the ivory ground.

Experiment on your sample board with swirls of cloth dipped in paint and rhythmically applied or you might try stippling. Take a small piece of coarse sponge dipped lightly into rather thick color and touch it on evenly on the light ground.

If at hand, the small end of a dry corn cob could be used to make





light swirls on a freshly painted dark ground, twirling it around until it makes a circular pattern in the paint. Change or clean it frequently.

Masking or decorator's tape (not cellulose tape) if obtainable, if placed along the edges of the panel to be decorated, will enable one to mottle the panel with unconcern, for when it is pulled off the edge line will be found to be kept very neatly.

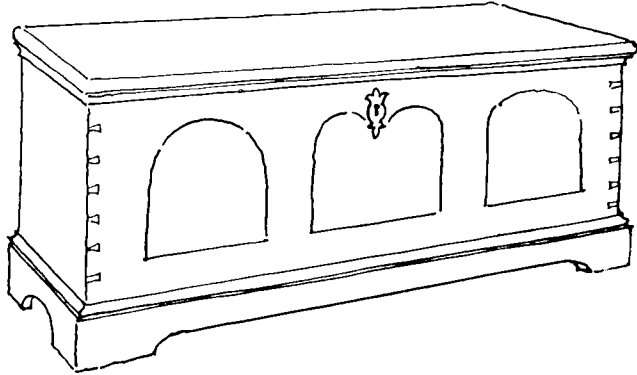
This tape serves many purposes; small pieces can be used instead of thumb tacks to hold the design in place for transferring.

## ANTIQUING

When the decorating is finished, if the chest is to get hard usage, varnish it for its protection with Valspar. When the varnish is thoroughly dry it should be rubbed down with powdered pumice and linseed oil, to give a soft old effect. If it is desired that the chest look very old, take some raw umber, thin it greatly with turpentine, brush it on over the whole chest, and then rub it off after a few moments, completely and evenly, with soft rags. There will be only a trace of this "antiquing" left, but it will tone down and harmonize all the colors.

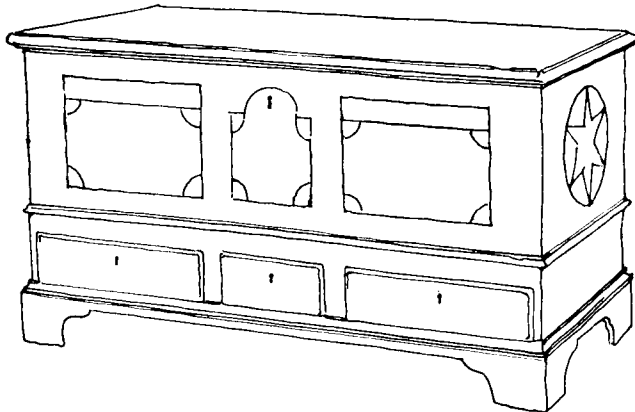
Practice this on your sample board first.

## Types of Chests



The chest above is a good average type, having a plain surface, dovetailed corners, bracket-shaped feet attached to a molded base. A molding edges the lid, which is hinged with strap hinges. The interior usually has a small hanging box or till at one end. There is often a "secret" drawer constructed as part of this till.

The chest below is of the more elaborate type, for it may have two or three drawers with brass or iron handles, set in above the usual molded base with bracket feet, which may be flat or shaped. Another molding separates the drawer section from the section above. There will be a metal escutcheon around the keyhole and, occasionally, metal handles on the ends.

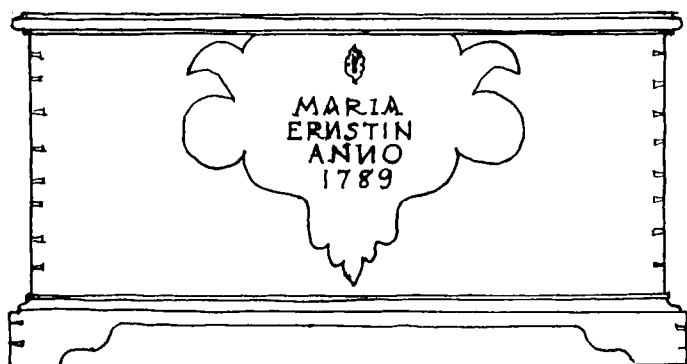
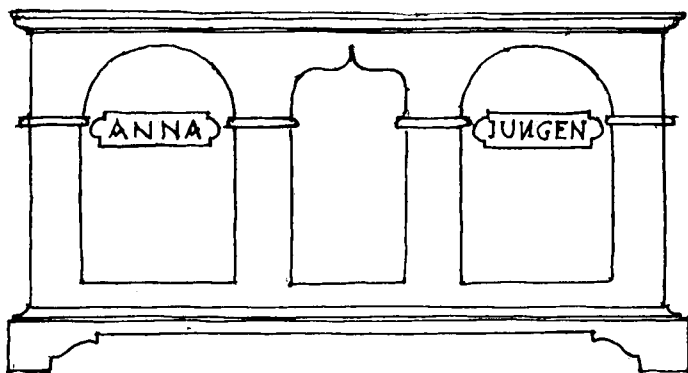


A B C D E F G  
H I K L M N O  
P R S T U W Y Z

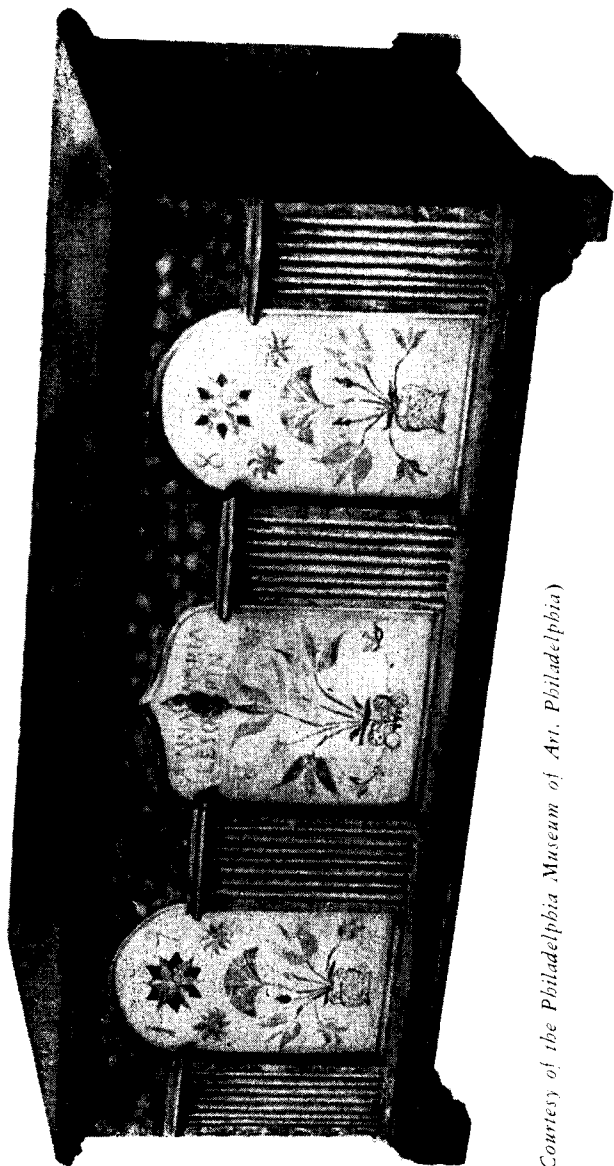
The sense of personal property was very strong in the early settlers of Pennsylvania, so it is natural that, on a chest, the owner's name would be used. Frequently the date and year are also incorporated into the design.

These letters and numerals are typical. The originals were so freely done that no one should hesitate to try lettering because of lack of experience. The greater the irregularity, the closer the approach to some of the primitive lettering found on the early pieces.

1 2 3 4 5 6  
7 8 9 0



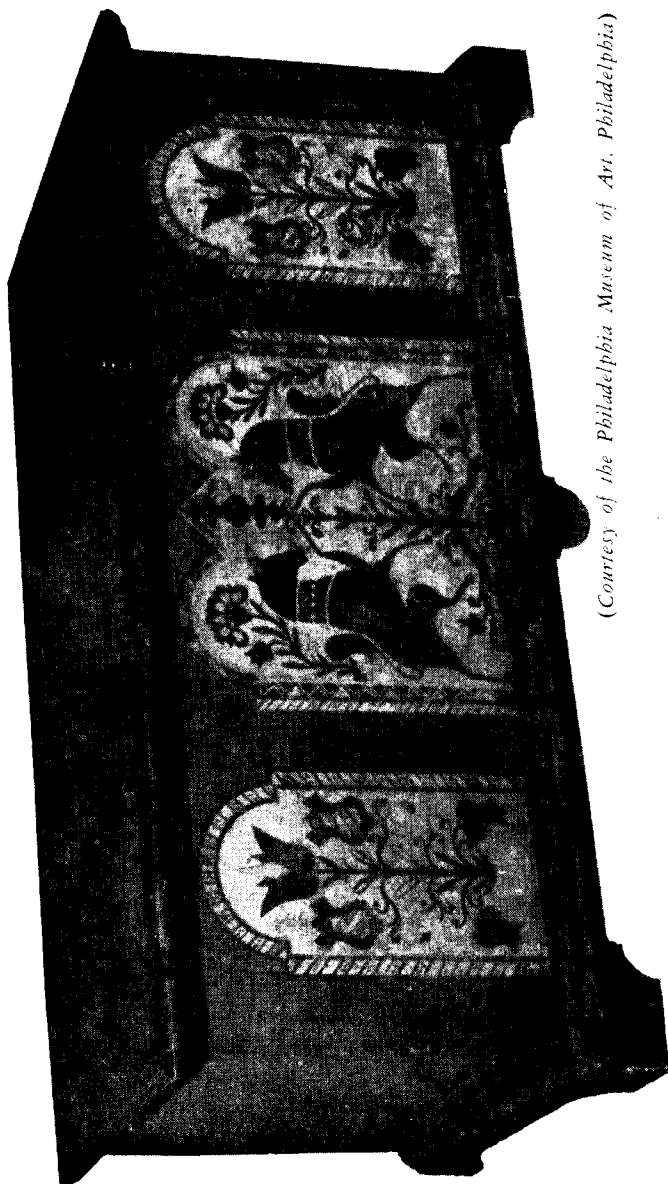
Considerable ingenuity was displayed in placing the owner's name and date on the dower chest. The pattern for the scrolled form on the centre chest could be made by cutting a folded paper into a pleasing shape.



*(Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia)*

This excellently constructed chest with its sunken arched and pointed panels is an example of the fine cabinet making Pennsylvania German chests displayed in the late 18th century. The grooved pilasters are painted in two colors with dots of another color superimposed. The space above the arches is filled in with a mottled ground. This chest, whose decoration is simply and delicately done, belonged to Anna Maria Lescherin, 1787.





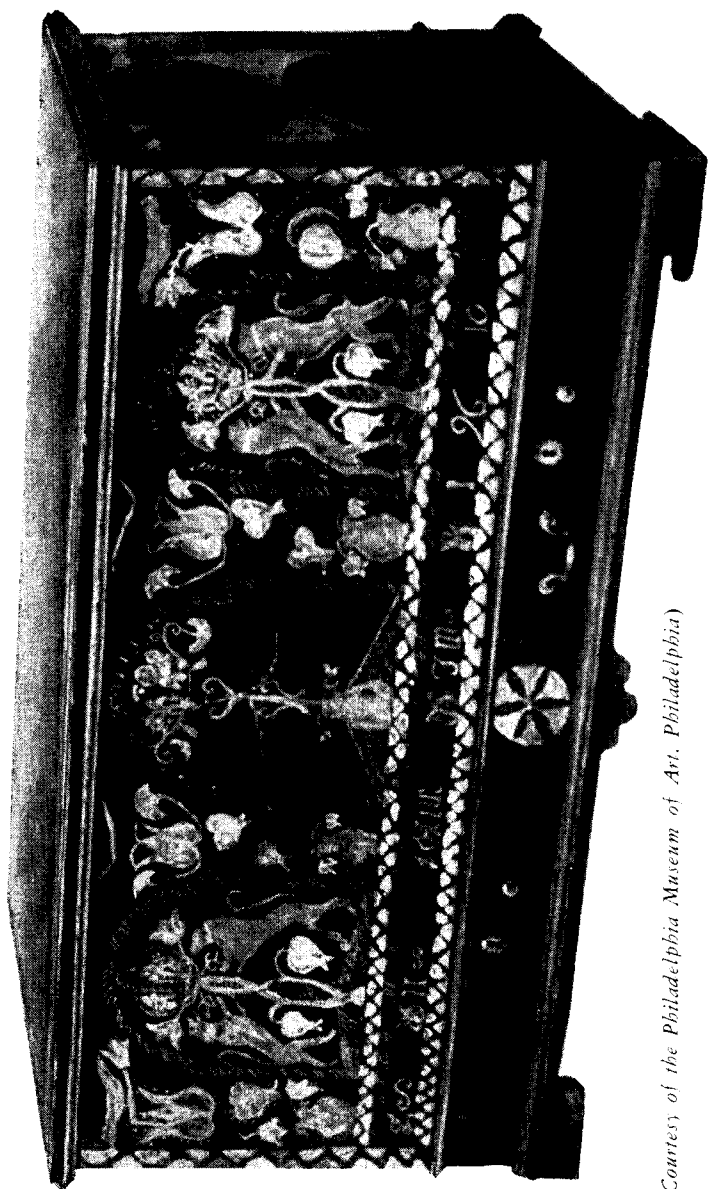
(Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia)

While the construction of this chest is simple, its decoration is very well designed and painted. The central panel, of unusual contour, is handsomely filled with heraldic unicorns and bordered with two different patterns. The rigidly conventionalized tulips are growing out of the usual small urn.



*(Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia)*

One of the extremely intricate designs which shows the fine detail that could be achieved by the best folk artists is shown above. This chest is the work of Heinrich Otto, a Pennsylvania German of Lancaster County, Pa. He was a publisher of woodcuts and baptismal certificates. The motifs found on his printed work and on this chest are identical. The arrangement of the panels and the lettering is very successful.



(Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia)

Though darkened by time and the soil that accumulates in 150 years, the richness of this closely patterned design still persists. There are unicorns and heraldic beasts, crowns, pots of tulips on which strange birds perch, once painted in gay colors on a very dark ground. The panels are surrounded by elaborate borders. There are chests extant of which this seems to be an adaptation made by an apprentice. The inscription has tulips used as punctuation between the Gothic lettering. Mariechen Grim was the maiden for whom this chest was made—1796.

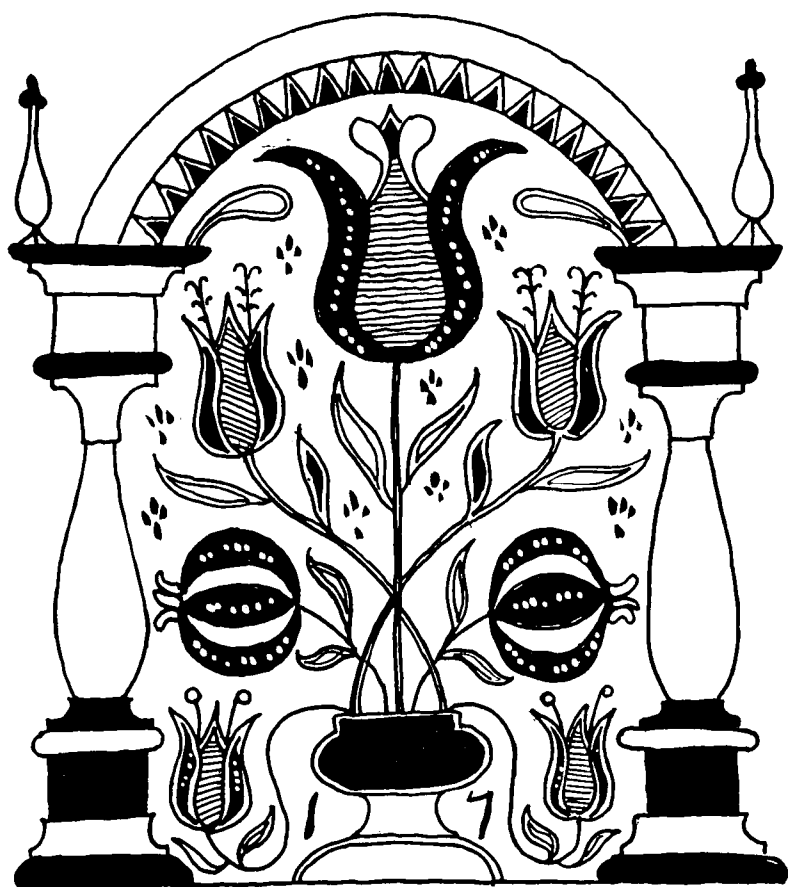


A graceful design of several types of tulips with conventionalized anthers protruding from some of them is contrasted with a modest pair of blossoms, all of which spring from a broad base representing earthy matter. The owner's name takes a central place in each panel with a star above it. The panel has a light ground with red, blue and black distributed through it. The background of the chest is a medium greenish blue.

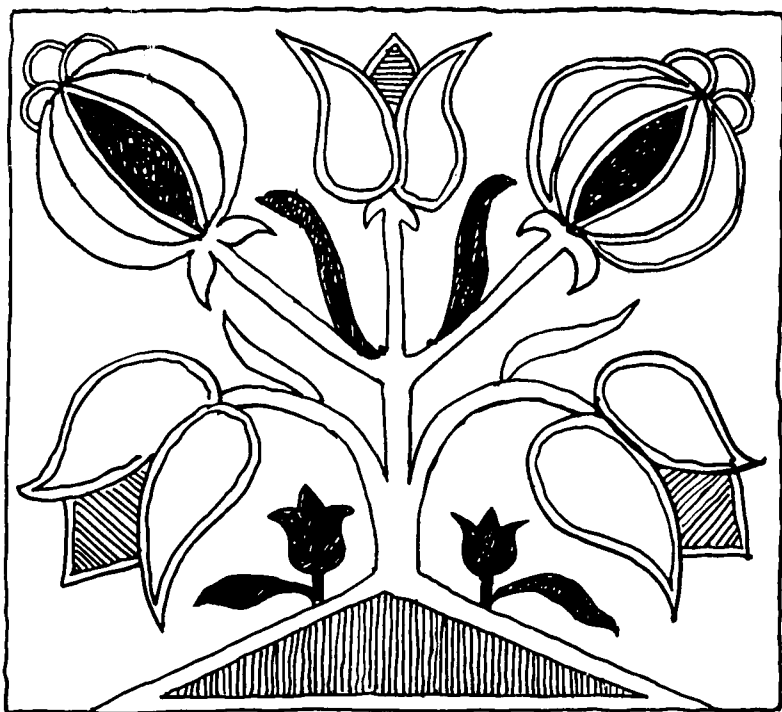


This panel is one of a pair on a chest whose surface had never been painted. The itinerant decorator executed the panels on the raw wood, as was customary, leaving it to the maker to swing the background color around them. This plan was never carried out. The background of the panels is unusual, for it is dark blue instead of the usual light tone. Against it, the red, yellow and white of the tulips and pomegranates stand out boldly. Certain areas are enhanced by closely set dots in a contrasting color. The design is executed with considerable sureness.

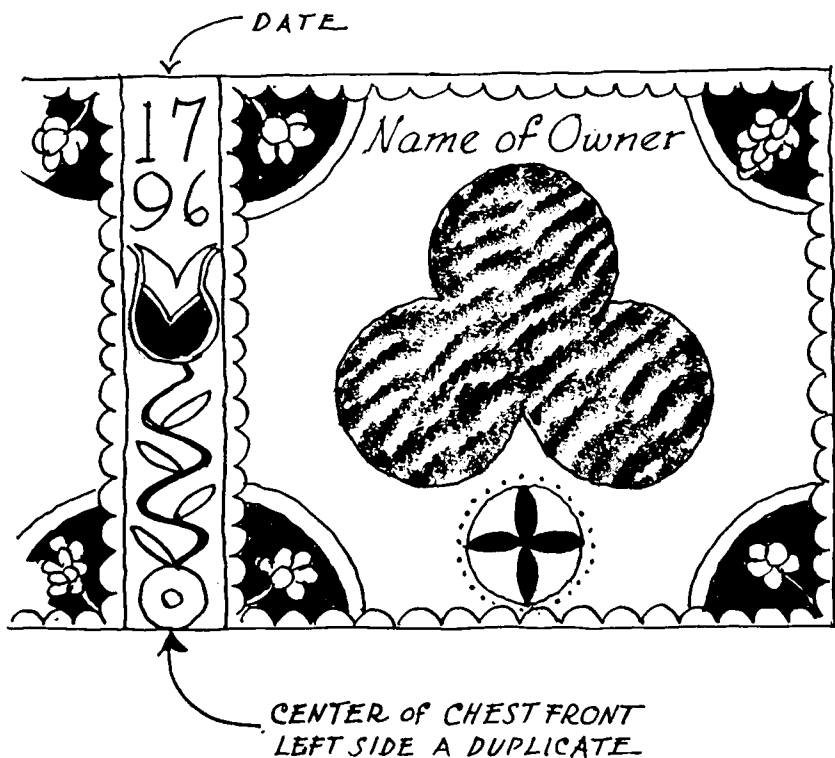




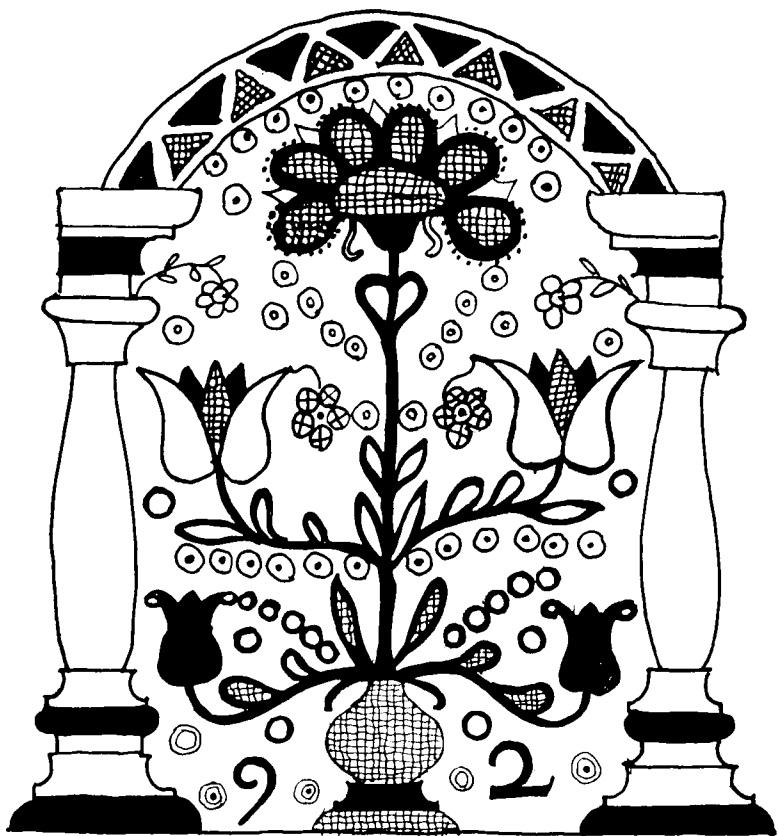
This panel and the one on the preceding page are the work of the same decorator. On other portions of the chest, not shown here, are the same running vine details and the similarity of the tulip and pomegranate forms is evident as is the skillful technical handling. The date 1798 is separated into two sections, two digits being woven into the design of each panel. This was a frequently used device. The ground is ivory, the floral forms are in red, blue, and black, outlined in white. Patterns of dots fill in open spaces in the background.



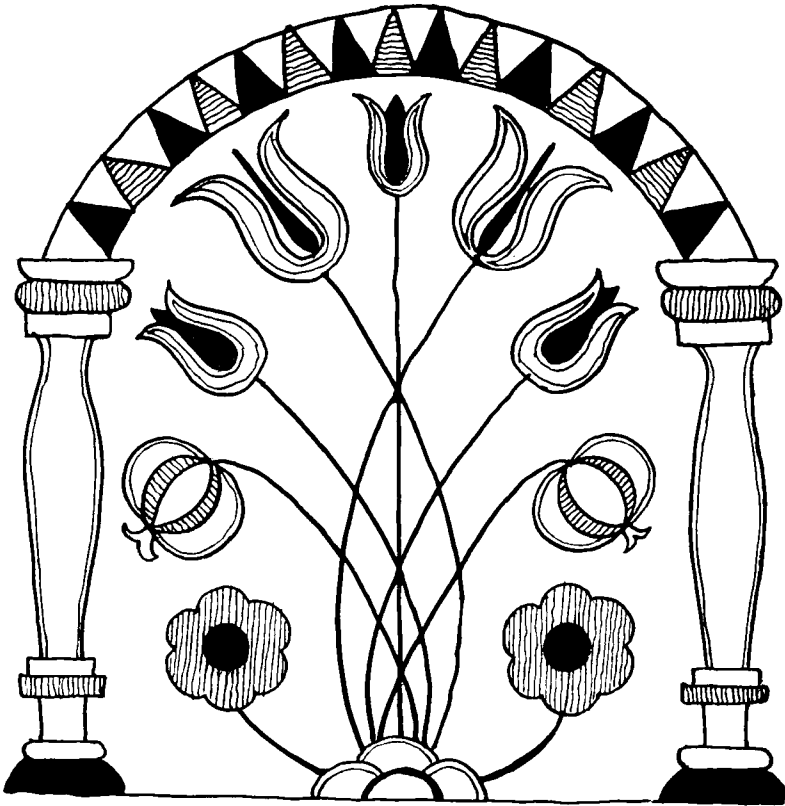
A sturdy growth of tulips and pomegranates fills this panel very handsomely. It grows from a triangular base which symbolizes the ground. The background is a dulled yellow, the flower forms in red, green, and black. The small tulips nestling beneath the bold curves of the sideward springing pair of tulips, are entirely black. There are two of these panels flanking a heart shaped space which carries the name of the owner, a masculine one instead of the usual feminine one. It was made in 1792, this date being placed in the heart shaped space along with the owner's name.



This pattern presents an unusual division of space on the chest front not only because of the featuring of the central band decoration, but of the scalloped edge which borders the entire panels. The design is based on the use of the compass, with which all the design structure can be worked out. The central panel is filled with a highly stylized tulip with the date 1796 worked in above it. The name of the owner is placed towards the top of each panel. The decoration on the ends of the chest is identical with that on the face.

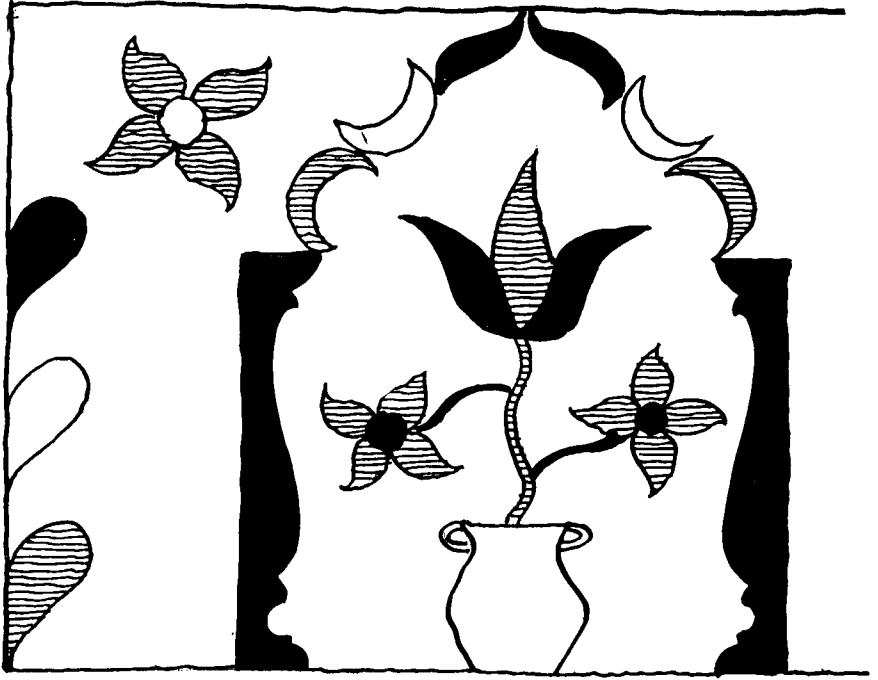


The unknown decorator who designed this panel was very skilled. Instead of restraining his hand, his love of detail is evidenced by the elaborate dottings around the forms and all over the background. The arched panel and the painted pilasters are very common features on Pennsylvania German chests. Naively drawn and perhaps architecturally unsound, they nevertheless construct an elaborate frame for the urn with its branching floral forms. The date 1792 is incorporated into the ivory background. The surface of this chest is a dark bluish green, which contrasts nicely with the two light panels.

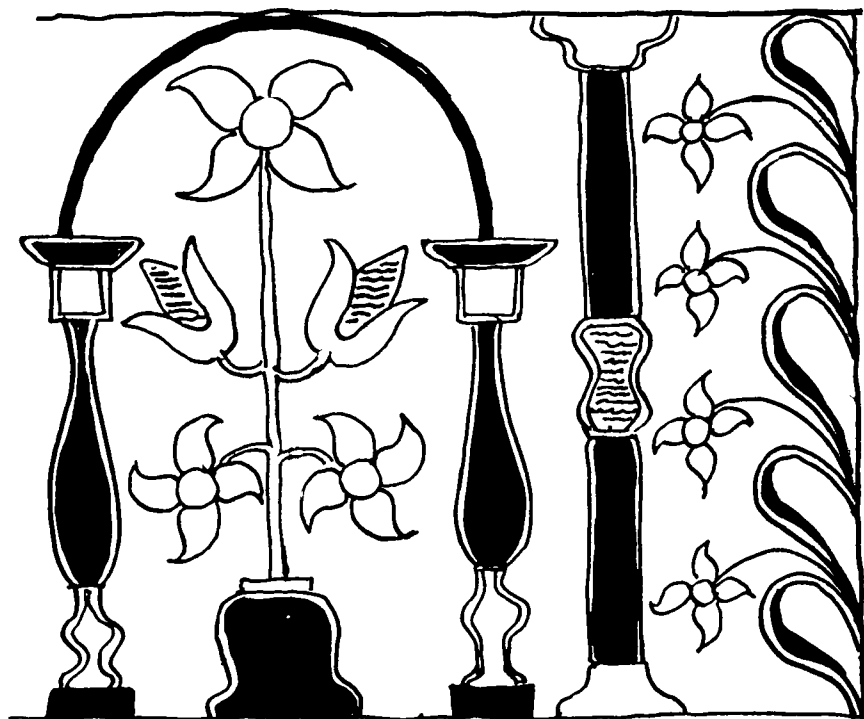


In 1804, some unknown artist painted this chest. In addition to a pair of panels like this one, he added a smaller central rectangular one, filled with similar details. Around the keyhole he placed a six-inch circle which is patterned with triangles such as fill the arch of this design. These triangles are painted in alternating colors. In the remaining spaces he put four star-like forms, two free-standing birds resembling parrots and three hearts at each corner, from all of which grow sprays of small tulips. There is no difference between the background of the panel and that of the chest.





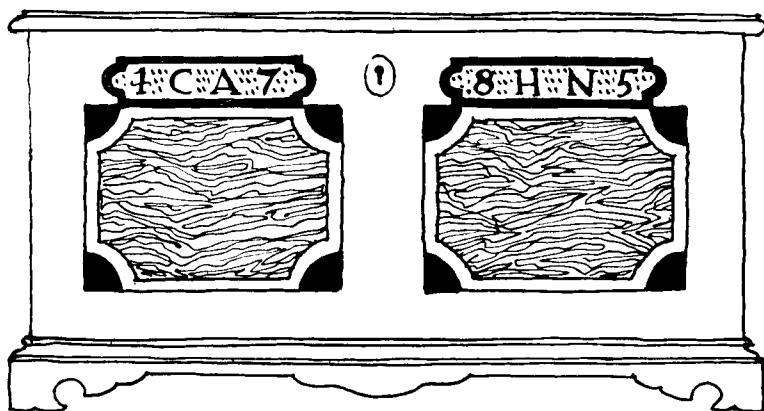
This graceful urn with its simple spray of three flowers is set in a frame of balustrades seen in profile. On them is balanced an arch composed of crescents painted in three different colors. The background of the chest is brown, which is patterned with white swirls. The urn is white, the main tulip is red and black, the flowers on the sides are red. The hearts at the corner, beginning at the top, are black, white, and red. The detached red flower has a white center. Red wavy lines are used to break up and enrich certain white areas to advantage.



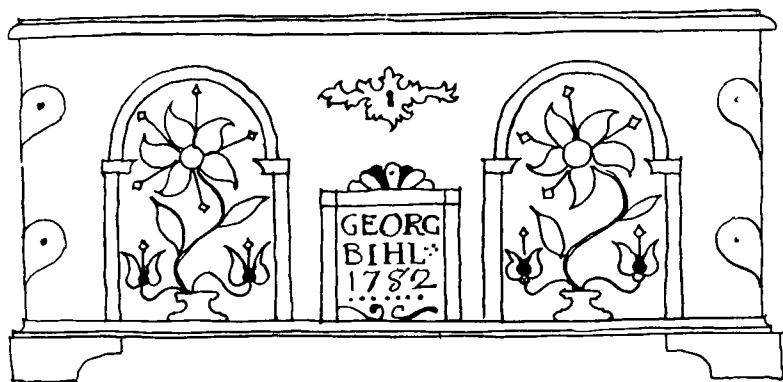
The same details are used in this panel as are used on the opposite page. The slight difference in arrangements does not disguise the fact that they are pieces done by the same decorator. The balustrades are seen in full face, the hearts at the corners have multiplied and flowers grow from them, the floral spray in the urn has also become more elaborate, but the hand that painted them is the same one. This chest has white flowers with red centers, balustrades in black and yellow, white hearts at the corners; all on a blue background.



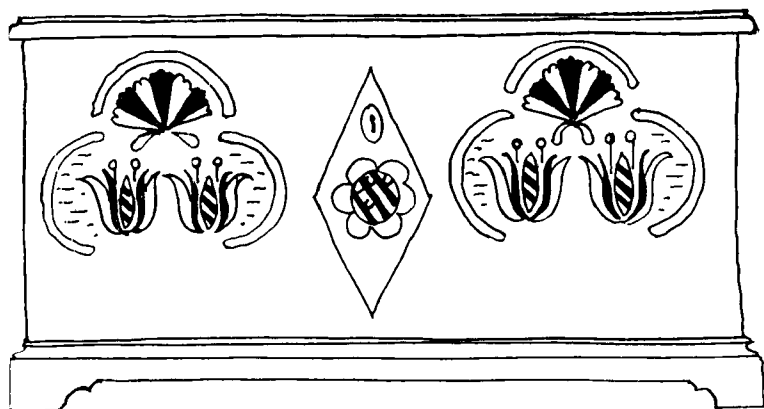
Occasionally the Pennsylvania German decorator departed from the usual spacing. These two pages show other divisions of the front area. The chest above has beautiful professional lettering used as a decorative band, needing very little further to fill out the spaces.



The chest has mottled panels on the plain ground. The narrow lettered panels show a favorite method of spacing initials when the letterer's skill was not sufficient to handle the problem of the full name. These letters C. A. - - H. N. are the symbols for the name Christianna Hartmann, 1785.

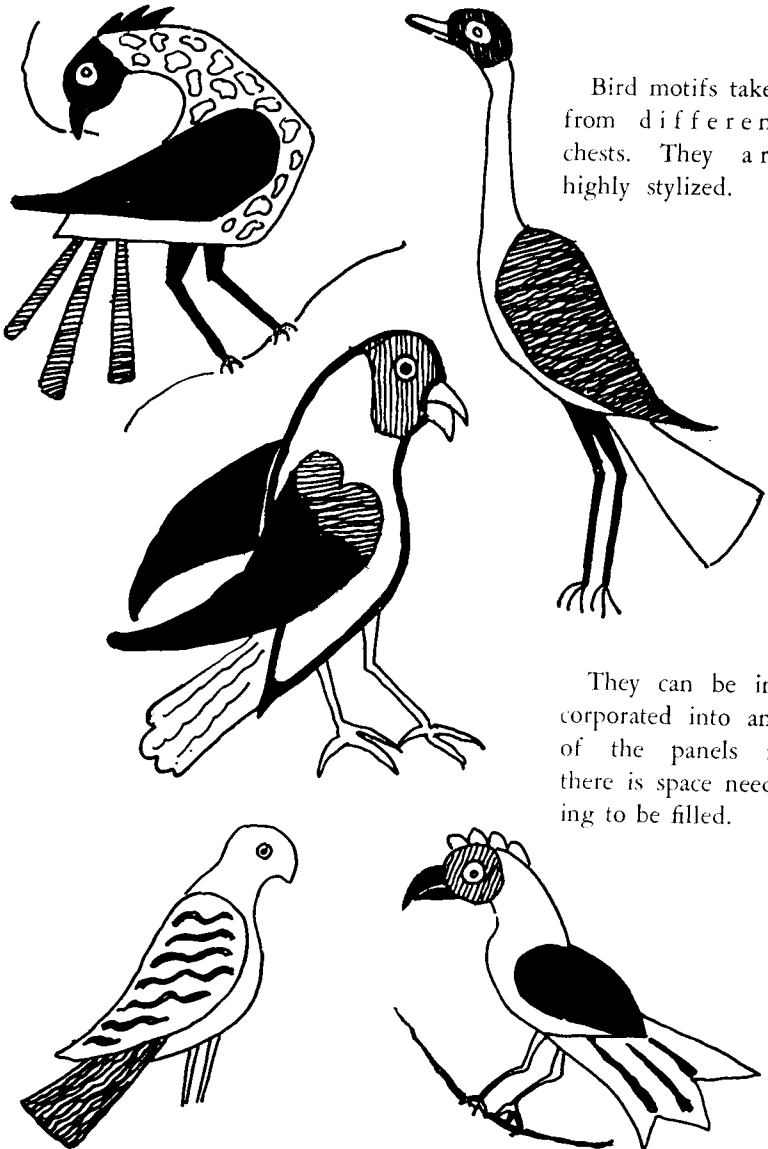


The small central panel carrying the masculine name of its owner is an excellent way of placing a short name, especially if it is beneath an elaborate escutcheon.



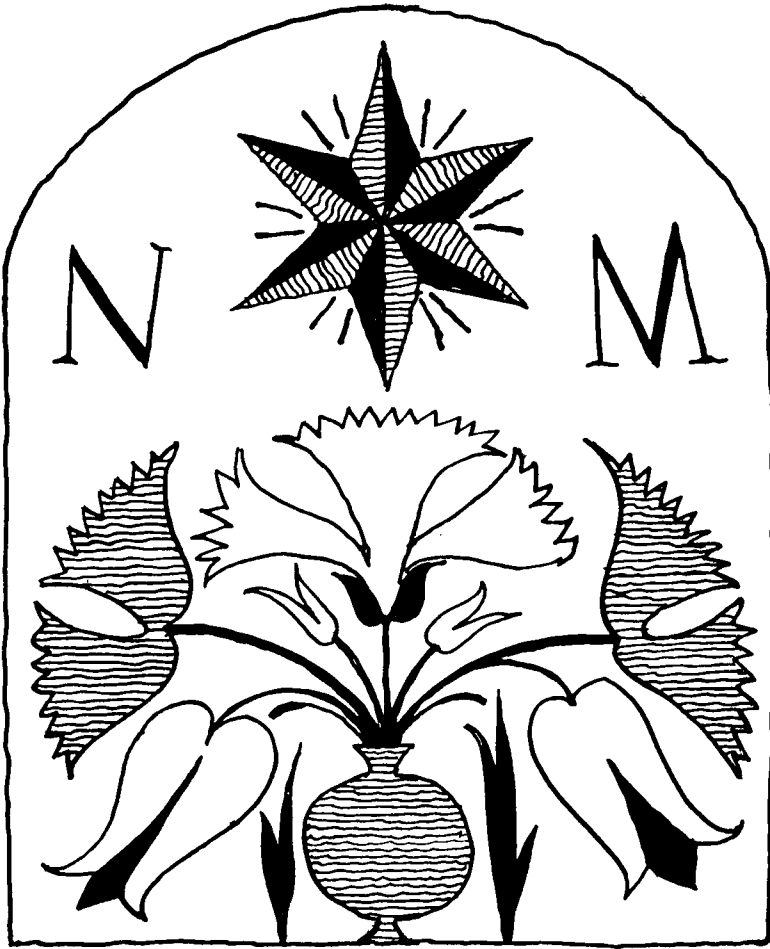
These boldly drawn stemless tulips with their definitely striped petals in red and white, set frankly in an area bounded with curves suggesting a trefoil, constitute an unusual arrangement. The central lozenge, equally unusual, is in white, with a red and black motif.

## Various Bird Motifs



Bird motifs taken from different chests. They are highly stylized.

They can be incorporated into any of the panels if there is space needing to be filled.



A slenderly based urn holds a great bouquet of tulips and flowers resembling old fashioned pinks with their sharply cut petals. Above it is a prominent six-pointed star executed in two colors. On either side of the star are the initials N. M. The balancing panel carries another portion of the owner's name. The central panel (this is one of three) is dated 1785.



The names of very few decorators are known, but this panel is the work of one of the few men who signed the pieces that came from his workshop. He was Christian Selzer, 1749-1831, of Jonestown, Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, who scratched his signature in the vases. This chest, a very fine specimen of his direct, free brush painting, was done in 1795. His family became skilled also in making chests and decorating them, but never had quite the facility, inborn love of ornament and experimentation as is evidenced by the originator of this graceful piece of decoration. The leaves are in very dark brown, the tulips in dull red, blue, and gold on an ivory ground, the scrolled border is black outlined with red. The vase is black.





# The Home Craft Course Series

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—Donald A. Shelley, Curator of Paintings and Sculpture, The New York Historical Society, in *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, November, 1945.

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